

Help and hope for people living with aphasia

By Kate Gilderdale
Stouffville This Month

June is Aphasia Awareness Month.

Thirty thousand people in Ontario have aphasia, which can result from a stroke, brain injury or brain disease and can affect all aspects of communication. The York-Durham Aphasia Centre at Parkview Village offers a wide range of services to assist clients and their families in coping with the condition.

Run by professional speech-language therapists and social workers, together with trained and dedicated volunteers, the centre uses group-based communication programs to help clients gain greater independence, allowing them to restore some control over their daily lives. The centre also provides support for families learning about aphasia.

Three years ago this summer, Ria Koning's world was turned upside down. "I had my accident in August 2001," said Ria, who has written some notes to help her tell her story. "It was a hot summer day and I walked all the time."

The former kindergarten teacher, who was unable to communicate after the accident, had brain surgery at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, where she stayed for a month before being transferred to Newmarket's Southlake Regional Health Centre for another four months. Today she is a regular at the Aphasia Centre and has made a remarkable recovery.

"I like the Aphasia Centre," she said. "I have enjoyed the people and volunteers and other staff, Ruth and Rita and Bonnie." She is articulate and funny, and on occasion, when a word escapes her, she takes it in her stride, turning it into a kind of word search game with those around her.

In 1995, Pam Riddell had three strokes in two days and was admitted to the Wellesley Hospital, where she spent seven weeks in intensive care. "I came back to Newmarket and I was in there for nine months before I was discharged," she recalled.

During her stay at the Wellesley, "I was in ICU the whole time. I didn't know whether I was coming or

going and the only words I could speak were yes or no. It was very frustrating." She started coming to the Aphasia Centre in 1997 and these days she speaks clearly and without hesitation of the difference the centre has made to her life. "I have found it very helpful."

Pam and Ria have become close friends and it is hard to believe that they have gone through such devastating experiences. Conversation flows between them, along with much laughter and a deep sense of camaraderie. They talk about their families and pets, using the life history books they have put together at the centre.

Local events during Aphasia Awareness month include a Walk and Roll-a-thon June 10 and the Annual General Meeting and Volunteer Appreciation evening June 15, both of which take place at Parkview Village. Steve Goff, who had a stroke 10 years ago which left him with aphasia, will be a special guest at the evening event.

"His presentation will tell Steve's journey, with little speech, but a lot of communication," notes his bio. "He and his wife Carol Steedman are meeting a challenge to bring aphasia awareness to all of Canada and beyond."

"They have presented to speech language pathologists, caregivers, people with aphasia and their families. As a 'motivational non-speaker' Steve has made numerous presentations, including keynote addresses at aphasia conferences in Edison, New Jersey and Vancouver, B.C. Steve and Carol are presenting in Philadelphia on June 6".

Dealing with aphasia can be overwhelming, and the condition often leads to feelings of depression, anger and uncertainty for both patients and their families. Steve and Carol are devoted to making the public aware of aphasia and to helping people and families affected with aphasia. Their message is one of hope and humour, found in moving forward and living with aphasia.

For more information, or to learn about volunteer opportunities, contact the Aphasia Centre's office at 905-642-2953 or visit www.ydac.on.ca.

Pam Riddell and Ria Koning share a laugh at the York Durham Aphasia Centre in Parkview Village. Both women are regulars at the centre, where staff and volunteers provide therapy and support for people with aphasia, a condition which affects communication after a stroke, brain injury or brain disease.



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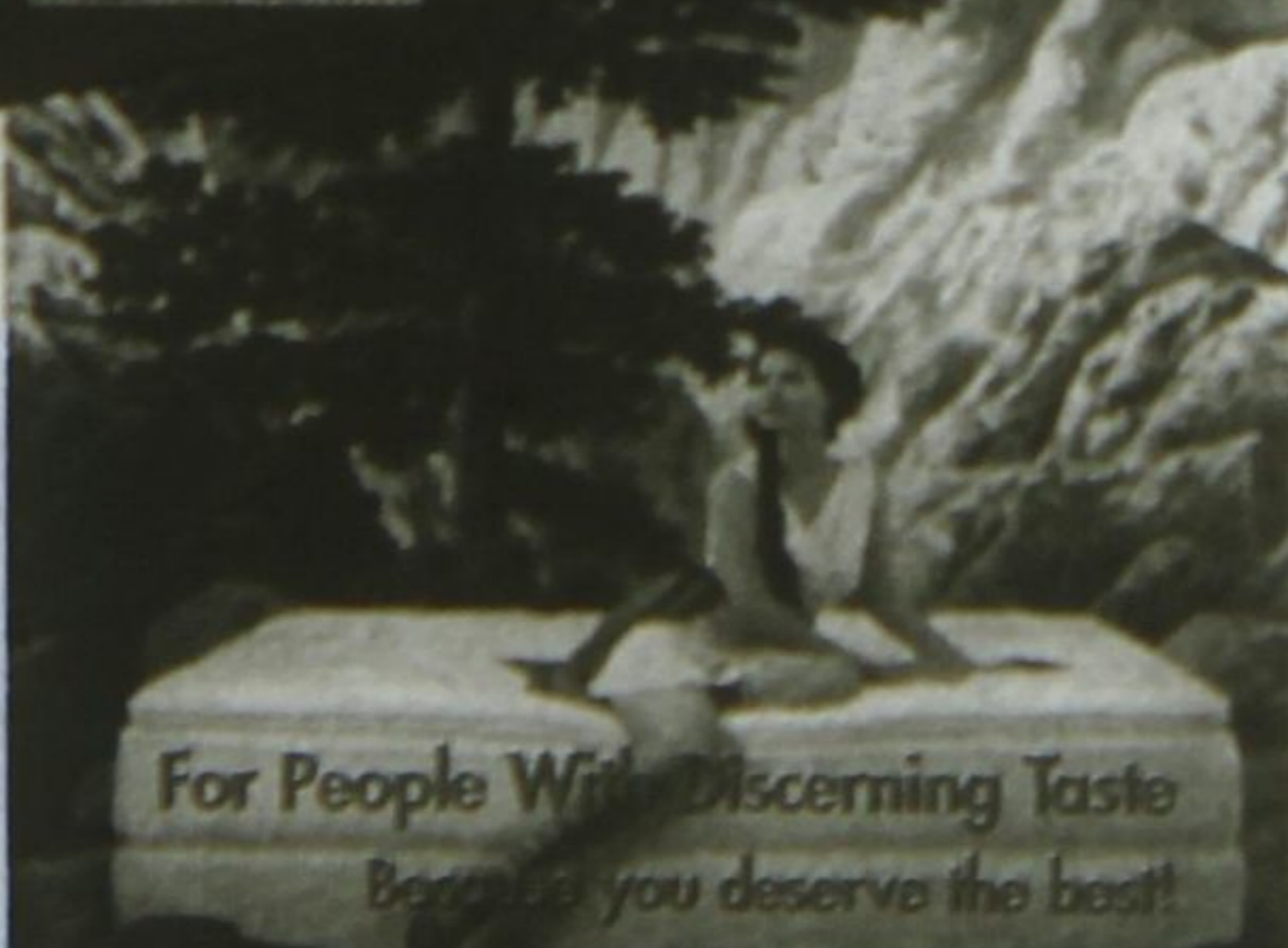


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